

## **Dance Department History Project 2010-2011**

### **Transcribed interview with Mary Bee Jensen Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis**

I'm Mary Bee Jensen, the former founder and director of the international folk dancers. I was blessed to arrive at BYU with President Wilkinson in 1952. I saw the University during my time there grow from a student body of about 5,000 to 30,000. I also saw the programs grow as the student body and university grew. I feel like I have a wealth of history of the dance program because I was part of it.

When I first came to BYU, I was invited by Cynthia Hurst and Dr. Leona Holbrook to come as a temporary instructor. My teaching was all in sports; I taught everything from soccer to archery to skiing. Anything that moved, I taught.

But there was one dance class that I was able to teach and that was square dancing. I have a love of dance. I was born to dance. It had been my goal my entire life, and I finally found an outlet for it at BYU. I was raised in a Protestant family and I taught at BYU as non-LDS. But my love of dance and my relationship with the students made all the difference in the world. With that one square dance, I felt like all the years of not being able to dance as much as I wanted to erupted like a volcano. From the first day, I enjoyed every aspect of movement, music, and dance, and was able to enjoy a very wonderful career through that area.

I started in square dancing in 1952, and I retired in 1985. I learned to be a caller and learned to teach them how to call, but more than that, we brought together square dance jamborees, we brought state square dance jamboree to BYU. We would combine it with folk dance, which I learned in Dr. Leona Holbrook's class and that started our dance. When I got there, there was one folk dance class, and one square dance class. Modern dance was very little for 5,000 people. The curriculum was just not very broad. As we progressed in 1956, Betty Tague adopted two little twin girls and I got the folk dance class. That was the start of my career. I took the beginning folk dance and a group of us that had been folk dancing.

With six couples, we had been invited to go out in the wards. We danced wherever we could. But 1956 was the start of the international folk dance program, and that's where I centered my efforts. We started out with six couples and at one time I had 380 students in a try-out basis in the program. But we worked and the greatest endeavor came to us in 1964. The people in the organization invited us to be the USA ambassadors to the festivals in Europe. We accepted that. During the growth from '56 to '64 it was just tremendous. I was presenting concerts before '56 but it wasn't called Christmas Around The World. Our first concerts were in the Smith Fieldhouse until we moved to the Marriott Center.

Our overseas travel started in 1964 and we traveled as USA ambassadors for the people organization. It started in '64 and is still going today. In '64, there was no money to go, so my husband and I borrowed \$26,000 from the University to take the tour. That tour laid the base for all the touring, since we were the first ones. It was exciting to travel abroad for twenty-seven years, while I was there as USA Ambassadors. In '66, we had an experience of going through fourteen countries and we were there for three months. Dr. Clayne Jensen and his wife Eloise accompanied us and I think in those three months, Dr. Jensen caught the vision and glory of what folk dancers could do abroad as ambassadors for the church, the university, for Utah, and for the USA. He was a great backer of our program from then on.

Let's go back from '64 into the late '50s. I had the first folk dance camp for a week. We also were always into marching. I wrote a book on precision marching. We had a marching workshop in the late '50s. I had the Cougarettes one year. I just liked the variety. I liked many things. I didn't have to stay with one. Whatever it was, I wanted it to be the best.

In the 1950s, nine were performing in the Smith Field House. In 1960, we named our Christmas concert Christmas Around The World and have celebrated the 51st anniversary of Christmas Around The World and the 50th anniversary of the organization. As we started to tour Europe, I became a member of the world congress, which has seventy-eight countries today. They promote international folk dancing, folk arts, and friendship. I represented the USA for fourteen years. During those years, the BYU folk

dancers were the most sought after group in any of the festivals in Europe. Through my association with them, it acquainted them with a great university I came from. We traveled throughout all of Europe into Asia, into the Eastern block. I remember so well performing in Moscow.

The wonderful director pulled me aside after we did a television show, and she said to me, "I wish my sons were like your boys."

That meant so much to me because the folk dancers were the greatest ambassadors the USA could send out. I was told that so many times. I have hundreds of letters that reinforce that.

When I was working with the folk dancing, I worked with Alma Heaton, and Ben de Hoyas. We all loved to dance. Alma Heaton was the king of play parting games. We taught round dances, we taught ballroom, we taught everything. Ben de Hoyas was so much a part of it and started the ballroom dance team. At that time, we were a unit, we worked together, we shared our ideas, we shared our time. I would work with Alma with the play part games, he would work with me and square dancing. I mean, it was just one big party. We never, ever were selfish with our endeavors with our talents or our time. I think that is the whole basis of the dance department.

I came back to the Y to get a master's degree in modern dance. I didn't end up pursuing that, but I was a part of orchestras, I was very much a part of modern dance. Being able to see what they were doing correlated so well. It was one. It was dance. We loved it. We shared it. But the most important thing we did was to be there to provide opportunities for young people—to provide knowledge and background, knowledge and successful opportunities, so that they could go out into the world and be qualified to share the same talents we were sharing with them.

We were passing it on, we were developing teachers, we were developing dance. We never stopped in one place. We were always researching. My philosophy was to make it bigger and better. I wanted a bigger folk dance program; I wanted it better. Each fall, I would write out all my dreams and hand it to the dean, and I had to do it. That's the creative part of it.

We also did half times for basketball games. One of the greatest things was doing half times for football games. I did so much in marching and precision and precision marching and dancing, that I carried it over to the football team. The dancers would make formations and pictures on that field and the crowd just loved it. That was dance.

We had the invitation to do precision dance and march with 2200 girls. They marched and danced in unison, and that was dance. Dance is so broad and folk dancing just seemed to be my calling. With folk dancing, and with being a member of the World Congress, I became very acquainted with world leaders. In attending folk dance camps in Stockton and Santa Barbara, I also became acquainted with the top leaders in the U.S.

But the students were the primary source of absolute joy; you could provide new and successful experiences for them. Everything is tied around the students. At the very beginning, we wanted to educate the students to be good in all facets of dance in ballroom, and in folk.

We contributed and helped each other do this. Today, they are pretty well separated as one identity in the organization because dance has become so professional. I respect it, I admire it, but I miss the good old days when it was all for one and one for all. The folk dance program grew by leaps and bounds. It was respected throughout the world. The BYU folk dancers were the favorite groups to dance at International Folk Festivals.

In Belgium for their 10th anniversary, they invited the top five groups back. There were four eastern ensembles and BYU. BYU got the best applause anyone could get. They won the people's hearts.

I had a professional dancer tell me, "Anyone can do your dances, Mary Bee. But it's the students—it's the spirit, it's the sincerity, it's the wholesomeness. It's everything that comes through their performance."

That goes for every dance program at BYU. I admire and respect it so much. Even in retirement, I'm the lady on the first row who applauds the students first and the faculty who make it possible. I feel that I was very blessed to spend my career at BYU. It was Lord first, my family second, my folk dancers third. It was such a high successful career that left me with friends all over the world. but more than that, my folk dance family.